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Fabled Fox caretaker **Joe Patten** led an expert to antique drums that are part of the theater's Möller organ.

After a fine tuning, drum beat goes on

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Recently a small delegation entered an anteroom at the Fox Theatre, clambered up a handful of vertical ladders, through several locked trapdoors, and into Chamber A, a gallery that rarely sees humans.

Inside this slightly dusty attic was a Rube Goldberg-style assemblage of bizarre and familiar musical instruments — a bird whistle, tambourines, a 10-foot xylophone, drums, cymbals, castanets and an air-raid siren — all held within a lattice of wood framing and hooked up to a network of wires and pneumatic tubes.

Drums: Theater gets better bang for aging instruments

► Continued from K1

These instruments are part of the Fox's 1929 Mighty Möller organ, which, like other theater organs of its vintage, can unleash bass drum booms and cymbal crashes with a flick of a finger.

Allan Vella, the compact, redheaded manager of the Fox, was among the searchers clambering into the aeries of the organ loft. He was intent on fixing what had become a nagging annoyance.

The manager, who is also an amateur rock drummer, had been listening to a demonstration of the organ two years earlier, shortly after he arrived to take over the theater, when he heard something strange.

The snare sounded more like a trash receptacle than a drum.

"I asked Joe Patten, 'When was the last time you tuned that snare drum?' and Joe said, 'You need to tune snare drums?'"

Patten, of course, is the 81-year-old "Phantom of the Fox," the man who spearheaded the effort to save the old theater from the wrecking ball in 1974 and who tends to the care and feeding of the Möller organ.

A lifelong bachelor, Patten actually lives at the Fox, in a 3,600-square-foot

apartment high up under the rococo theater's onion domes.

Though Patten is a mechanical genius (he has personally rewired each of the organ's 30,000 switches) he's not a drummer. So after their discussion, he led Vella up the ladder into Chamber A.

Vella's eyes almost bugged out. He saw vintage 1928 Ludwig drums with mahogany shells, their calfskin heads held by rock maple hoops.

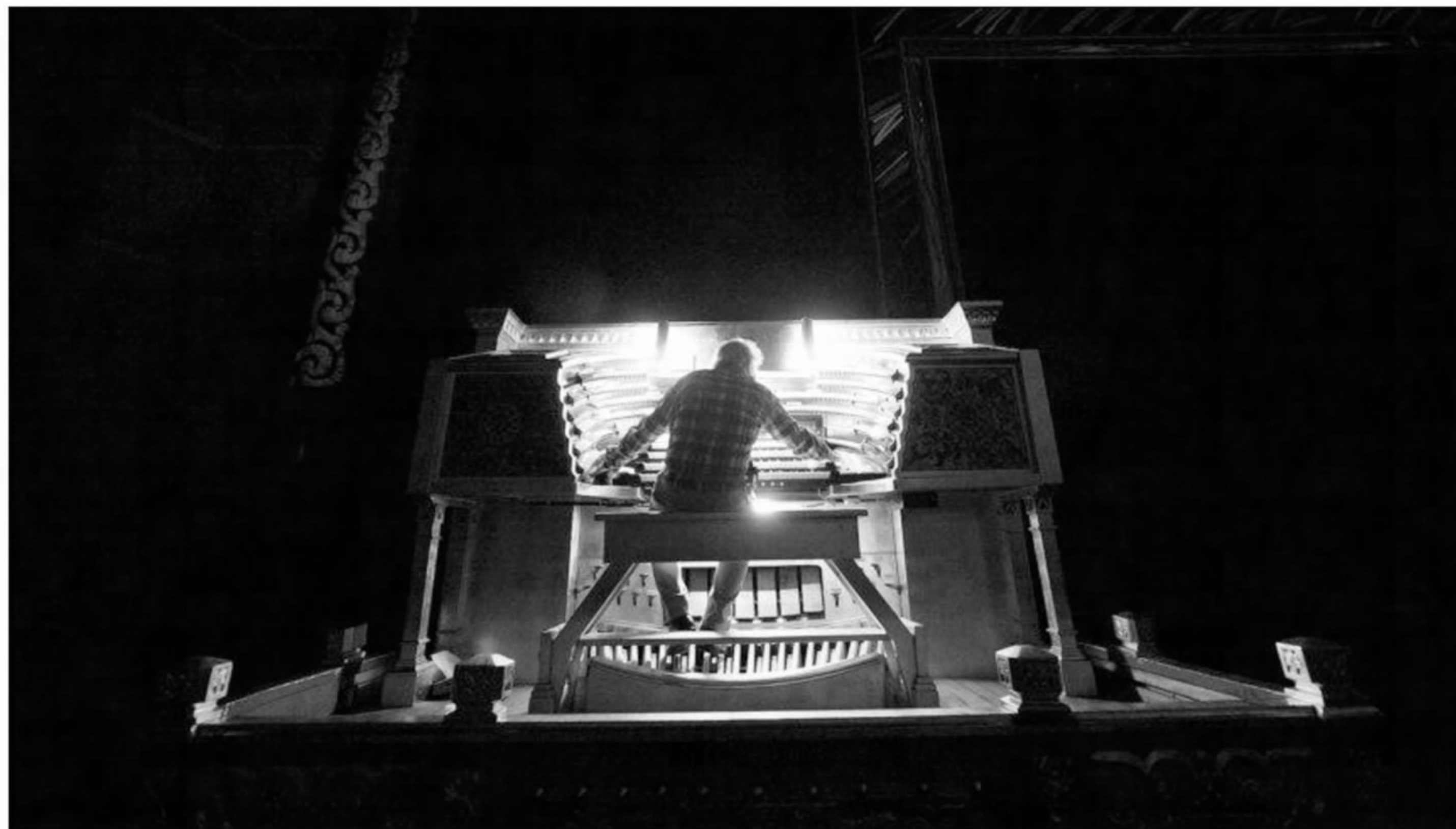
He saw Zildjian cymbals actually made in Turkey, with "Constantinople" painted on the metal in India ink. All artifacts prized by percussionists.

He saw drums with no contemporary match, which meant he had a problem. There was no contemporary hardware to fit the antique shells.

Then Vella located Charles Wolff, a former Atlantan, a one-time drummer with the Brains and other rock groups, and a collector of vintage gear. With Wolff in tow, Vella and Patten planned a final assault on Chamber A and Chamber B of the organ loft on a warm afternoon in early November.

The slightly bent but still preternaturally spry Patten led Vella and Wolff up 30 feet of vertical ladders to Chamber A.

Behind the gilded, ornate



Photos by JESSICA MCGOWAN / jmcgowan@ajc.com

Joe Patten, 81, sits at the Fox Theatre's Mighty Möller organ and works on the keys. The huge, intricate instrument powers other instruments, including the drums that recently got a tuning.

screens separating the chamber from the audience were the guts of the Mighty Mo — organ pipes, percussion equipment, mallets poised on pneumatically driven rotator arms and snaking wires and tubes.

The diminutive Vella had no problem negotiating the tiny passages of the room. "I would have made a good chimney sweep or a good organ repair man," he joked.

At eye level hung a bass drum, cradled in a custom-built wooden armature. Patten triggered one of the switches manually and a mallet swung briskly, smacking into the drumhead with the sound of a cannon.

He cautioned his guests to be careful with their hands.

"They sure get you, if you don't watch 'em," he said.

Boom! Patten tried out a few more strikes.

"They really hit it," Vella said. "It's like [Metallica drummer] Lars Ulrich playing it."

"Or," suggested Wolff, "the ghost of John Bonham."

Wolff, a collector of vintage drums (and aficionado of Bonham's Led Zepelin), brought along some hardware that would fit the antique, and he got to work.

He took both bass drums down from their cradles and replaced a few missing tuning rods. Then he showed Patten how to "seat" a drumhead, pushing in the center with one hand while tightening the "claws" against the



Resident caretaker Patten tinkers with the organ's pipes. At right is a bass drum. Recent maintenance and adjustments on the drums were probably the first since Patten was a small boy.

edges of the hoops.

Afterward, Wolff wrote his name and the date in a tiny hand on the drumhead, documenting in pencil its

tuning, and to commemorate, in a quiet way, his visit.

He was thrilled to be there. "This is the most fun I've had in months," he said.